NEWS

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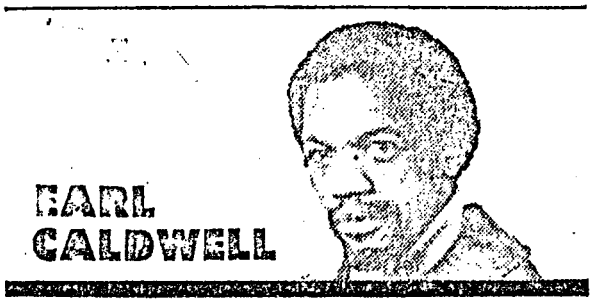
Frozen in time: King slaying & the man in the bushes



It is a time to look back. It is the anniversary of one of those days in our lives set apart from so many others because something important happened that we can never forget.

It was 11 years ago tonight down in Memphis, at a sprawling old motel there that sits in the shadow of Beale St., that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the giant, was shot and killed.

It has been 11 years, but the mind has its own way. It can blot things out. It can allow them to grow fuzzy and dim, and in time they disappear.

But some images never seem to fade. They always remain sharp. They stick there in the mind as though waiting to be understood, aware that the present, as Robert Frost wrote, is too crowded, too confused to contemplate.

So now 11 years have passed and we look back on that night in Memphis when the Rev. King was killed, recalling where we were and what we did, but still not knowing what by now we should know about the assassination.

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IT IS THAT WAY even though books have been written about the killing, even though many newspapers have made exhaustive investigations and a full-blown congressional inquiry has been held.

On television last night, Andrew Young, who is now the American ambassador to the United Nations, was asked about the assassination. On that night 11 years ago, Young was in Memphis. He was one of the Rev. King's closest aides and he was there in that cluster of people underneath the balcony at the motel, and he witnessed the killing.

Now, on television, he was asked if he believed that James Earl Ray was the lone assassin.

"No, I don't," he said. He paused ever so slightly. "I'll never believe he was," Young said.

Being there, being there when something really important happens. It is a want that often becomes an obsession with reporters, especially those who are very young and lust for a chance at a big story. They tell themselves that they do not want to see anything terrible happen, that they wish no one ill. Their reasoning is only that if something is to happen, they want to be there.

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THE DREAM OF being there comes from the frustration of near misses, of always arriving on an assignment after whatever it is already has happened. And of being told, "Geez, you should have been here an hour ago." Or last night or yesterday. Then the reporter must try to piece the story together. Seldom, though, does it come out right.

"Stick to the facts," an editor admonishes. But the reporter knows the facts can mislead. "We don't want opinions," the editor says. "Let the columnists express the opinions."

But what are the facts? Are they the accounts that officials provide? Or are they a consensus of opinions?

Being there, it is believed, would solve the problem. If just once you were there, then you would know and then you could say. As a reporter, it always was that way for me until that spring evening 11 years ago as twilight gathered over Memphis, bringing with it the feel of an oncoming chill. Then it was my turn to come as close as a reporter ever does to being there.

It was a Thursday. It was near 6 p.m. and the evening light was still good. I was in my room at the Lorraine Motel. It was Room 215 and it was on the ground floor of the motel, only a few doors from the room that the Rev. King occupied. It was deadline time and I had been trying to get a long distance line to telephone to New York the story that I had been working on.

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THE SHOT SOUNDED like an explosion. I took it to be a bomb. It was my fear working. Bombing was something I identified at that time with the South. Homes and schools and churches had been bombed, and on this night I was certain the motel was the target.

It was one of the terrorist tactics used against blacks, this bombing was, and — as all this welled up inside me—my response was automatic. There was no hesitation. I was already on my feet. The door was open. There was the split second needed to identify the sound and then, in one, two, three strides, I was in the doorway.

There was no smoke, no fire, no mass of debris. There was, off to my right, a knot of people. They were jumping about, and it occurred to me that perhaps someone had set off a firecracker.

"What a lousy joke," I thought.

From the doorway, my view was of the thicket across the street and my attention was drawn to a man who was stooping low in the bushes. He was nothing strange or suspicious. My attention focused on him only because he was there. There was no one else, and my eyes stayed glued on him. He was off to my right. He appeared to be coming out of a crouched position. He was alone, partly hidden in the thicket. He did not look in my direction. His attention was trained on something else—something that I could not see.

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HE WAS WHITE, this man was, and he seemed rather chunky. It could have been his clothing. He was wearing something white, and I took it to be a pair of overalls. As he straightened up, he seemed to twist his body and yet his eyes stayed riveted on something else.

What? What was it he was watching?

He began to move, slowly, in that twisting manner, off toward his right, as though he were about to run to the firehouse on the corner.

Now, from the yard, came the moans and then the cries and I learned that attention was behind me, up on the balcony. It was the Rev. King. It had not been a bombing. It had been rifle fire, and the Rev. King was the target.

It was all years ago, and still I wonder about the man who climbed up from the bushes that night. The police, in their reports, say the man did not exist. But I know better. I was there. And today, I'm like Andy Young. I do not believe that James Earl Ray alone was responsible for the assassination.

Now, today, here in the City of New York, everyone asks where the leaders are. And I think about Memphis and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and that night 11 years ago.